Spring Greening

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Springtime is a time of new beginnings and fresh starts. During this season, our thoughts turn to spring cleaning and clearing out much of the waste we have accumulated over time. As we cleanup our homes this spring, we can take our efforts a step further and clean and green our communities by making choices that improve our air quality, conserve water, eliminate waste and create sustainable communities. Local governments can lead the way by making environmentally friendly choices for our communities.

As residents clean out their homes, much of this waste ends up at the curb as garbage. However, there are tools that local governments can employ to help keep items out of landfills. Towns can establish a community-wide garage sale day, where residents can sell unwanted goods. Municipalities can also host days where residents put out unwanted items on the curb for others to take for their use. Those materials that are not removed by residents for reuse purposes can then be collected and disposed of by the municipalities. To expand source reduction in a community, promote grass "Cut it and leave it" programs to encourage residents to leave grass clippings on their lawn. These clippings provide a natural and healthy fertilizer for a growing lawn. Additionally, municipalities may opt to provide backyard composting bins to residents, to encourage the reuse of food scraps and yard trimmings.

Municipalities can also adopt recycling ordinances that go beyond requirements set forth in the county recycling plan by designating additional recyclable materials as mandatory recyclables. For example, towns can require residential, commercial and institutional sectors to recycle corrugated cardboard and the recycling of residential

carpeting and supermarket food waste. By increasing what we recycle we can save landfill space, reduce disposal costs, conserve resources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Improving energy efficiency and conservation are essential to building sustainable communities. Municipalities can assess their energy efficiency by conducting an energy audit, which identifies where energy is consumed and how much energy is consumed in a building. Staff can conduct an audit in-house or an outside consultant can perform one. Information gathered from the energy audit can be used to introduce energy conservation measures, such as retrofits on heating, cooling and ventilation systems and the use energy-efficient lighting for traffic lights, street lights and exit signs. Audits can also point out opportunities to use alternative and renewable energy in government buildings. Many local governments are turning to solar panels, wind turbines and landfill methane to generate energy to operate their buildings.

Simple steps can be taken to reduce energy use in buildings. Many cities across the nation are instituting "lights out at night" and "lights out when not in use" policies and installing office occupancy sensors to avoid unnecessary energy use. Municipalities can require that all future appliances purchased are ENERGY STAR qualified appliances. Planting shade trees around community building can help cool them in the summer and absorb carbon dioxide emissions.

Energy costs to run drinking water and wastewater systems can represent as much as one-third of a municipality's energy bill and is often the single largest utility expenditure for a city. By increasing water efficiency, communities can preserve water supply and reduce costs associated with the production of potable water and treatment of

wastewater. Towns can require or offer incentives to encourage the use of efficient water fixtures in new construction and rehabilitation projects. Low-flow showerheads, efficient washing machines and dishwashers can be easily installed and are very effective at minimizing water use. Municipalities can also encourage the installation of plumbing systems that recycle water for uses such as irrigation.

Energy conservation is one tool in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Municipalities can further reduce emissions through transportation policy.

Every gallon of gasoline burned emits 20 pounds of carbon dioxide. Smart choices about transportation, the largest source of greenhouse gases, are critical to reducing these emissions. When purchasing new vehicles, municipalities should consider hybrid and alternatively fueled vehicles. Municipalities can also require the use of ultra low sulfur fuels in their vehicles. Local governments should educate the community about idling restrictions to reduce unnecessary emissions. Communities can explore the use of fuel-efficient vehicles, such as scooters for parking enforcement and offer incentives to employees that car pool or take mass transit. In planning for future development, communities should consider creating additional bike lanes, making communities more walkable and transit oriented development to reduce automobile dependence.

The potential for local governments to become environmentally sustainable and reduce greenhouse gas emissions is significant. By utilizing strategies such as these, municipalities can improve the quality of life for residents while protecting their environment. Whether we take simple steps or large ones, working together our collective actions will reap great rewards for our communities and our environment.